

Masthead Logo

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STELLAR KIM

Findings & Impressions

My first glimpse of her was of a single small breast. Flashed on the X-ray screen. Lit in contrast. A hint, just a bump of fatty tissue against the chest cavity. Next to it, its close twin. Asymmetrical like most women's breasts. A far cry from spectacular.

Straninsky, Alicia: the way her name first appeared to me, across a computerized label on her medical chart. A name that brought back memories of my Polish grandmother stuffing pierogis with thick fingers, the faint smells of the Baltic Sea that wafted from her sweat-ers, the way she swayed her hips as she sang "*Hej, górale, nie bijcie siy. Ma góralka dwa warkocze podzielicie siy!*"

Other information I learned: Age 32; Single; No history of breast irregularities; No children; Allergies to penicillin.

What I saw: The usual striations indicating a buildup of calcium.

What I also saw: Just past the spiculated masses of microcalcification, something that fanned out to form a white mass. An uneven density in the left quadrant of the right breast.

About cancer: Mention this word, and people talk about randomness, about mystery. But the guesswork is mostly in why it forms. Once it hits you, charting the course of the disease is pretty much a matter of exact science, despite the runaround health professionals will give, despite the stories of miraculous recoveries. Even as a radiologist, I can predict who'll make it and who'll be a goner and it is of little surprise when the condemned grow weaker with each visit and then simply stop showing up.

Where I've been wrong: It still stuns me to see the 82-year-old World War II vet who shuffles in every six months, his steps made small by the humongous growth on his hipbone the doctors left him to carry to his grave three years ago. Then there was the soccer player,

a sixteen-year-old with more muscles in her calves than most men could flex in the length of their legs. She should've fallen into the category of healthy children who recover largely unscathed from acute lymphoblastic leukemia. She came in every few months with a flock of friends, their heads shaven in solidarity. They practically sprinted into the office, death for them a thing too distant even in a hospital basement. But in less than a year, the slippery thing in her bones had burrowed its way into her head and her brain began to swell and then she wobbled in, first on a cane, and then a walker, even its four legs not proving sturdy enough for her trembling hands. Her mother stopped calling for appointments and then, when a year passed, I had the intern call her doctor and move her files to one of the cabinets marked *DECEASED*.

What a radiologist does: Nick, my seven-year-old, periodically asks me to explain. I look at pictures of sick people, I tell him. There are the one-timers: fractures, sprains, chest X-rays for pneumonia. But mostly, I search for benign tumors, lesions, and cancer. I suggest biopsies to seal diagnoses. I look for patterns of tissue density. The skill of a radiologist is in determining what's harmless and what'll have to be cut out or irradiated.

For years, I haven't been able to sleep with a woman without subjecting her to thorough analysis. I poke in the usual spots and work three fingers in circular motion. My onetime wife, good Lillian with her sense of humor, would offer me her breasts, cupping them while I searched for sinister growth under her soft skin.

What I failed to diagnose: The slickness of the roads in an intense April rain, the impatience of Baltimore drivers after a 17-20 loss by the Ravens against the Titans in overtime, the sudden, illogical curvature of I-95 near the Russell Street ramp, Lillian's eyes fatigued after filing another late-night report for the *WX1P* eleven o'clock news. How easy it must've been for her to sink into the plush leather seat, to let her eyes glaze over the sea of red brake lights, to let her mind settle onto the party for Nick's third birthday, how effortlessly the impact would've crushed her beautiful skull.

I should've been prepared for: The cruelty of grief.

For months, Nick looked for Lillian on the evening news. When he saw Lillian's replacement—an eerily close copy of my wife with shoulder-length blond hair, he yelled, *Mommy!* pointing to the TV. *Mommy!* he demanded several times a day, often just as I'd gathered enough focus to vacuum or wash a load of laundry. I took the boy through the talk, telling him of the changing seasons, of molting snakes, of butterflies and cocoons, of how everything that lives must die. I took him down to the river where we'd said goodbye to what could be salvaged of Mommy, and finally when the boy couldn't be made to understand, I turned on the TV night after night, putting him to sleep with his digital mom. *Say good bye to Mommy*, I'd say when he struggled to keep his eyes open until the end of the newscast, and he'd wave a chunky, sleepy hand to Linda Jones of WXIA. When he kissed his surrogate mother good night, his thin hair turned all static.

Maybe I took the easy way out. *Tell Mommy you love her*, I encouraged. And he'd babble incomprehensible reviews of his day and declare all kinds of love and ask for promises impossible to keep.

After a few months, he asked with a tired voice one Saturday morning, *When is Mommy coming home?* And I said, doing my best to look him straight in his eyes, *She can't leave the TV, my little man*. I called him what Lillian would when he'd done something exceptionally good for her, like pouring milk into her cereal long before she'd sat down at the table or offering half-melted M&M's from his palm.

Nick began to look for Lillian inside the TV. He clawed at it with pink fingers.

What friends suggested: Get out there again. Married friends, especially, said with feigned enthusiasm, "One of us has to keep this interesting." They flattered me, called me Sean the Man. Lady Killer Miller. They envied my brief relationship with a part-time lingerie model. But after the accident, they held their wives closer.

Transition into relationships: It sounded doable, almost. But there seemed no clear end to grief and the beginning of happiness. I expected the fluttering of the heart on first dates. I allowed myself to turn into a romantic. I put on freshly ironed shirts. I spritzed cologne and felt for butterflies in my stomach. But even with Tanya, even after sex with a model, the kind of sex that made me shudder

with force, something would creep up—an image, a recollection of a graze, the way Lillian and I giggled like teenagers after making loud love into the pillow to keep Nick from waking—and, always, it would make me turn my back in a heavy way while Tanya stroked my back and said she understood, that I should talk to somebody about loss, about starting anew.

When Alicia Straninsky appears: She surprises me by coming in person to pick up the CT report. Normally, I send these off directly to the doctors. I'm surprised to see that Alicia's shockingly short—only about five feet tall. But more than that, I'm unprepared to see so much vitality. Her cheeks are ruddy in a way that must make her seem permanently embarrassed. She looks like she might never have stretched out properly from a child's portly body. She has substantial arms and legs, like those of hefty old women who can chop wood and move a refrigerator. Something about her smells vaguely like cinnamon. All I can think is, I've never seen a chubby woman with small breasts.

"Did you have a question, Miss?"

"Yes. I'd like this explained."

No patient has questioned me on my reports. The normal course of things involves a statement of my findings and impressions. I make recommendations, suggest checkups. I make no promises and no advisements. So-and-so has been diagnosed with terminal brain cancer, I write in my reports. It's the oncologists who'll talk to newly retired couples about debilitating therapies. It is they who are left to explain to teary-eyed parents why modern medicine could not save their children.

But Alicia reads over my report, right in front of me. Although I forget my brother's birthday and seldom call the parents of Nick's playmates by their correct names, I can mouth along with every word Alicia reads.

Findings: Malignant tumor with diameter measuring 5cm in the lower left quadrant of right breast. Infiltrating ductal carcinoma, grade 3. Metastatic carcinoma involving two of thirteen axillary lymph nodes. No nipple involvement noted. No indication of abnormal growth in the contralateral breast.

Impressions: Stage III invasive carcinoma of the breast.

"So what does this mean?" Alicia asks, her cheeks impossibly pinker than before.

"You'll have to talk to your doctor."

"You're an MD, right?" she asks, and I tell her this is true.

"It's Friday. You're going to make me wait all weekend? Monday's a holiday."

I agree with her again. There's something about that face, a certain helplessness that inexplicably reminds me of Nick after he's dropped his ice cream cone. I'm not sure why I give in, but I explain the major thrust of the pathology report and wait a minute for her to digest this. Nothing changes in her expression. All she says is, "How can you be so sure? Just from pictures?"

"And from your biopsy."

"I see. The little needle can tell all this?"

"That's right."

"In my ducts?"

"That's where it often starts."

"I guess I'm never breastfeeding."

"Do you have children?"

"No. But I guess this rules that out."

"Not necessarily. You should talk to your doctor."

After a while, she says. "So what does this mean, though? I mean, what are my prospects here?"

"You have to talk to your doctor. He can tell you better what to do from here."

"Right. I don't suppose I can ask that of you. Thanks. It was kind of you to explain this."

A week passes. I don't think about Alicia, but I do pull into work each morning with some vague anticipation.

When she next appears: "Hey," Alicia says to me, a woman with a yellow parka pulled over her head. I'm returning from lunch and had broken into a jog because I've forgotten my umbrella at the restaurant. "You're the radiologist."

"Hi," I reply before I recognize her. She has the same ruddiness in the cheeks, but dressed in yellow, she looks like one of the plastic ducks I use to lure Nick into the bath.

"About to go in for my first radiation," she says. "You were right, I guess. I got something in there that's not good news."

"Good luck to you," I say and then wonder what more appropriate, reassuring things might be expected from someone with years of medical training.

"What's the deal with these hospitals? They have a different person doing every part of your treatment. I thought I'd be seeing you, but I see a radiologist who just does radiation oncology?"

"That's right. We're all one-trick ponies, I guess."

She doesn't laugh. I catch a glimpse of a cigarette between her fingers.

"You know, you should give those up."

She offers me one and says, "It's only ex-smokers who say things like that. You born-again."

There's nothing for me to say. We let the soft patter of the rain do our work. I try to keep my lungs from burning as I inhale hard on the damp Camels.

When I pull out of the parking lot at the end of the day, the rain has died down, leaving a general mist. I recognize Alicia right away. Her yellow parka is bright even through the haze. She's sitting at the bus stop, a newspaper folded under her to absorb the rainwater.

"Alicia," I call out. It takes her a minute to realize where the voice is coming from. She spots my open window and stares hard, squints. She walks over and ducks her head toward me, keeping herself well within running distance. "It's Sean, the radiologist." It's odd to identify myself this way.

"Hi," she says, not moving.

"It's raining. Where're you headed?"

"Home. Morrell Park," she adds.

"I'm driving that way," I offer, but she gives no response. "Well, jump in if you want."

Alicia enters slowly, planting herself squarely in the seat before swinging her legs in. We drive out of the lot and into traffic in silence until it occurs to me to ask about her treatment.

"You feeling OK?"

"It wasn't as bad as they say. Although your first time's supposed to be the easiest."

"That's what they say."

I follow her sparse directions, and when I pull up to a block of row houses, she says, "This is good" in front of a fading tan unit. We sit in silence, staring ahead.

"Nice house."

"There's not that much inside. I just moved down here. I'd planned on fixing it up a bit."

"Looks fine to me as is," I say. She catches me watching a torrent of water bypass a gutter that hangs broken off the roof. She presses her lips, trying to suppress a laugh.

"Feel better," I manage to mutter.

"Thanks," she says, and I'm not sure if she means this for the ride or the failed compliment.

The second time she comes in: Alicia takes me by surprise because it's been only weeks since her last exam. On the form, I see she's scrawled, next to CHANGES SINCE LAST EXAM, "subcutaneous mastectomy." And indeed, her breast has been scooped out, sparing her nipple but leaving her with even less tissue than before. Still, this is enough flesh to require routine monitoring.

"How've you been?" I ask, unable to make the moment less awkward, this attempt at exchanging pleasantries before I crush the remainder of her breasts between glass plates. She's clutching the back of the thin hospital gown, making laborious efforts to keep its ends together.

I help Alicia position one breast at a time onto the bottom plate. "Sorry. It'll be cold," I warn her. I switch on the machine and let the compressor do its work. In the end, I have to manually squeeze the plates to spread the meager amount of fat across the glass. She takes it heroically, wincing briefly. Other women, big-busted women for whom this is a less painful process, yell and curse.

"You know, it might be easier, it'd hurt less if you came in when you're not so tender. The week after your menstruation," I say as I help her retie her gown.

"Thank you."

"You might be sore today. If it gets really bad, take a Tylenol." I prepare my patients for everything. Everything except how the disease itself will ravage them.

There were no ways to prep Nick for the mourning. Lillian simply didn't come home one night; there was no process to his mother's dying. Each year, on Nick's birthday, we go to the Patapsco to visit Lillian on the anniversary of her river burial. Afterwards, we go for cheeseburgers and I buy Nick the works, everything off the menu. Last year, he asked between bites, "So she's just swimming around?"

This took me by surprise, and I had to sip my soda for a while before I could formulate an answer. "Mom never wanted to be boxed in."

"Dad." He didn't say anything until he had my full attention again. "Can I have my ashes spread?"

"Hey, that's no way for a boy to talk," I said sternly. When the waitress came around, I ordered us banana splits. I even insisted on brownies—Nick's favorite.

When Nick asks *Why did Mommy have to go away?*, I have no reasons to give him. I command him to take a bath and go to sleep. I watch his pajama legs disappear down the hall and wonder how even his walk could be like that of the mother he couldn't possibly remember in physical detail. I can hardly look at him when he stands with the sun slanting onto his head, his hair a shade like Lillian's.

After I buried Lillian, I found I couldn't get rid of even the things I'd sworn I hated. The dog that pissed on the couch reminded me of Lillian showing up one day with the terrier, saying, "She's lost. Look, no tags," as if that were all the explanation needed. The pot-pourri she'd introduced to the bathroom I could not throw away even after it had disintegrated to red dust. The miniature toys lined on the windowsill were reminders of our trip to Belgium, where, instead of cerise and framboise, we ate too many egg-shaped chocolates that opened to reveal plastic surprises. I'd had to move to another part of the city just so Lillian would not pop up suddenly while I was on line at the supermarket, show her face in the bathroom mirror as I shaved, slip her way to the side of the bed at night as I willed myself to sleep.

The routine we've fallen into: I see Alicia every week now. Since Radiation Oncology is next to my office, I drive her home. It's no way for a weak woman to travel, waiting for a public bus, inhaling

exhaust, and pushing through the crowd for a seat. She thanks me profusely.

They've stepped up her treatment so that in addition to the radiation, she's on chemotherapy. She's thinning out, not so much in her torso, but in unexpected places like her neck and elbows. Her ankles and knees look like skin coming loose.

Since I won't take money for gas, Alicia insists on stopping for coffee and muffins, though she usually doesn't buy anything for herself. As the summer progresses, we drive to the harbor. She's from Chicago and says the ocean opens her lungs up. The chemo makes her skin turn a dry brown in the sun, and so we sit in the car and roll down the windows and breathe in the ocean. These are not dates. But when there is the protection of clouds, we walk along the water and eat ice cream. Later, when she becomes too weak, we sit in the car and watch joggers and bicycles zip by.

I wonder if Lillian's traveled this far, or if she's already passed out of the Atlantic, floated down to the Caribbean Sea. Things have an odd way of traveling in open water. Perhaps the bits of Lillian have swum their way to all parts of the world. I'd once read about toy ducks that fell off a freighter container and all over South America, Northern Europe, and Africa, beachgoers found armies of smiling yellow ducks bobbing in over the surf and nesting among the seagulls.

"What did you do in Chicago?" I ask Alicia as the early evening strollers begin to descend en masse.

"You name it. I've done it. I was a nanny. I worked as a secretary to a pervert. I walked a herd of dogs for yuppies. You know Ann Sathers?"

"The cinnabuns?"

"I worked in the factory."

"Really?"

"Quality assurance. I ate a lot of cinnabuns."

I wonder if that's why she still smells like cinnamon.

On days when Alicia is well enough, she's famished. Today, she wants hot dogs. "You can't deny food to a woman who has cancer!" She has no qualms about playing the sympathy card. She piles on mustard and ketchup and then sauerkraut on two franks. "Ketard! Get it?" she jabs me with a weak elbow and I let out a small laugh. She's chewing grape gum—something that she says

helps her nausea—and from time to time, I catch flashes of purple between teeth and tongue.

“Where’s your little boy?” she asks as we sit down at a bench table. “I mean, when you’re not watching him. Is there somebody who takes care of him?” She spits out the gum into her hands and I can’t focus on anything because I’m wondering what she’s done with it. I’m tempted to duck my head under the table to see if she’s playing with it between her fingers.

“Where there’re colleges, there’re babysitters,” I say, and she seems satisfied.

“So I’m freezing my eggs. Do you think it’ll work? It’s still not a sure thing, but you can conserve them. You know, fertilize them later. A lot of women on chemo are doing it now.”

“That’s a smart thing to do.”

“They basically drain the eggs out of you and keep them floating in liquid nitrogen.”

“That sounds splendid. Sounds like one of Nick’s science projects.”

“Your son must be great. Kids are great.”

“Most of the time.”

“I thought I’d have plenty of time to have kids.”

I’m not sure how to respond, and when she sees me just staring at the water, she says, “I had chances to, you know?” She smiles. “Shit happens, as they say.”

Alicia chews hungrily, only intermittently bothering to wipe the orange mix of ketard from the corners of her mouth. There’s something admirable in her embrace of joy, however temporary. Even if it will make her sick, even if in two hours she could throw it all up, she won’t be denied satiation.

When I tell Alicia about Tanya, she’s amazed. We’re comparing our biggest bragging rights. She says she once guessed the number of jellybeans in a giant jar and won two thousand dollars, and I come back with, I once dated a woman who made a living in bra and panties. She wants pictures of her. “You’re bullshitting,” she says. “That’s the oldest lie in the book.”

For the next week, I search for Tanya in Macy’s flyers. She modeled regularly for their lingerie section, and now she’s apparently moved on to modeling business suits for them.

"You're kidding," Alicia says when I hand her the clipped flyer. Today, we've driven to a different pier to watch the late afternoon sun paint the bay in shifting colors of emerald green and pink.

"I'm not a pictures guy."

She flashes a smile. "A true romantic. Wow. Is that her?"

"It wasn't a big deal."

"Gosh. I've never looked like that in my life." With the dramatic weight loss, Alicia's deep-set eyes seem to burrow toward the back of her head. Her thinning hair is now brassy. She leafs through the rest of the flyer. "This is depressing. I've never been in a dress that resembles anything like these, you know?"

"What do you mean?"

"You know, I've never felt—pretty. Like one of those girls with perfect hair and skin. The kind that know how to flirt with guys." She catches me open and close my mouth, fishing for something to say. "The only good thing about getting sick is I'm finally skinny."

"I remember," she continues when I don't respond, "I went to the prom with a family friend my mother basically strongarmed into taking me. Mortifying, right? Well, I thought, hey, I'll make the best of it. I'll at least get a nice black dress. I thought those were so elegant. So royal. But of course the only thing that fit me and I could afford was this puffy magenta thing. It made me look like a giant cherry! I spent half the night in the bathroom. I just wanted to disappear down the toilet."

"Don't talk like that," I say and Alicia looks at me with some expectation. "Don't ever think that again. You're beautiful," I add after a while.

The way her face opens up, the way Alicia's eyes become liquid, suddenly make even the possibility of her disappearance unbearable. I think, maybe I've never realized the possible permutations of beauty.

For her birthday, Alicia has decided to throw herself a backyard barbeque party. She's insisted I come with Nick. *I'd love to meet your son, and there'll be other kids*, she urged. She's set up an inflatable pool and a trampoline.

When we get there, the only kids I see are infant twins. There're fewer than ten people, all neighbors. Alicia emerges from the kitchen with a tray of hot dogs. She has on a sundress and a wide-

brimmed hat. She's wearing makeup, and she smiles at me with two lines of thin red lips. For the first time, I notice freckles that fan out from one ear to the other.

"Hey there," she says when Nick hands her a bouquet of flowers. "Aren't you just a charmer! Well, I heard you like brownies. Guess what we're making!" She lets Nick mix the batter. He licks his fingers while Alicia clowns around, smearing chocolate on his cheeks. They turn on the oven light and watch the brownies rise.

While we eat, Nick has his run of the yard. He does impossible jumps on the trampoline. "Wonderful," Alicia says. "It must be wonderful having him in your life. We should do this more. My nephews are back in Chicago. I miss having kids around." She lights a cigarette. "I don't know why I've put my life on hold for so long. You know, now it's like I don't want to waste another minute. I'm doing all these things I've always wanted to do, because what am I waiting for? *Carpe diem*."

"What kinds of things?" I ask.

"Oh, the South Pacific. I've been watching these travel videos. I've always wanted to go there."

"What else?" I ask. I don't imagine even she can see herself getting on a long plane ride any time soon.

"Well, getting involved with somebody, I guess." She crushes her cigarette under her sandals. "So how come you never moved on? You, know, really moved on? I mean, do you ever think Nick would want someone in his life again?"

As if summoned by his mention, Nick runs up to us, asking Alicia to jump with him on the trampoline. "Oh, Nick, I don't know if I can do that," she says. "But do you want to watch videos? Have you been to an island where there're pirates?" Nick stops talking and his eyes widen. "You know what they have in the South Pacific? Cocoa trees. That's where chocolates come from." From the confusion on his face, I see Nick can't imagine chocolate that isn't wrapped in foil. "I'm planning to go there. Maybe we can all go together if your dad lets you. Would you like that?" she asks with a wink.

On the drive back, Nick recounts the ways in which he loves Alicia. *I like her pool. I like her jumping thing*, he says. *She's the best brownie maker*. "Can we come play next Saturday?" he pleads.

"Maybe, Nick."

"She said I can come over anytime."

"We'll see about that."

"Why do we have to see?" he asks in a voice like a goat's bleat. I see in the rearview mirror his eyes begin to tear.

What three-month checkups reveal: In the fall, Alicia comes in for her exam, cheerful as though she were only stopping by for a social visit.

"I'm having another get together this weekend," she says, sliding up to me while I help a patient with his forms. I tell her that things are too busy and she says, "OK, sure," but she lingers. "Another time then?" she asks when the assistant comes to lead her away.

She doesn't seem a bit embarrassed while the intern helps her at the machine. She doesn't cringe as the stranger's hands shift her breasts now here and then there. It's the response of a woman whose body has become a thing of science, who's stripped repeatedly for doctors and nurses and technicians. Her body has been poked at, argued about by oncologists, examined with cold instruments, described only in clinical terms. I catch a glimpse of her bra as she redoes her gown. It's a white cotton thing. No frills. No contraptions to lift and push together. Plain as day.

I stand over the technician as he processes her pictures. I want to shut my eyes when a new mass comes to life, because there it is, in her thigh, a stubborn growth that has planted despite the dual attacks by radiation and chemicals.

I file an updated report: Distant osteolytic metastasis to femur in left leg.

What I want to tell her: You should be spared. If I had the power to rip this thing out of you, if only I could sieve the little cells of poison swimming around in your lymph and blood.

What's ahead: Bone pain. And the slow perforation of the skeleton.

I call to tell her the news myself. She says, "Give it to me straight, doc."

"Don't call me that."

"OK, Sean. Lay it on me. Tell me how bad it's gonna be."

"It's spread." There's no way to soften the blow. "It's gone into your bones."

"I see."

"You'll probably have to increase the treatment. I called your doctor already. This isn't uncommon. They have medicines for every complication." I let myself believe what my patients often say: that fighting cancer is 99% mental.

"You're a sweetie. Give my love to Nick. I'd love to see him again."

What I withhold from her: Only 10–20% make it at this stage. After the leg, the cancer will wind its way to the pelvis. Then: to the lungs and then shortness of breath. Next: the liver. Her skin will yellow and become puffy. There'll be an unprecedented loss of weight until finally, Alicia will not be able to eat. Then: the brain.

With her new treatment, I can't drive Alicia home because she's in and out by the early afternoon. But when I catch glimpses of her in the hospital, I see there's a definite yellowness to her face. The roundness of her cheeks is gone. Her skin, darkened by the chemicals pumped into her body, is dry. It reminds me of cracked African earth after years of drought.

Today, she has a fantastic green scarf on her head. She looks like some odd goddess heralding in the spring, except there's no trace of vitality about her anymore. We comment on the rain and she jokes about her hair falling out.

"Positive attitude's the cure, right?" she asks.

"That's the key."

"Hey, how about a ball game sometime? Nick would like that, wouldn't he?"

"We should do that," I say, my tone betraying the conviction of my words.

Alicia lets out a small laugh. "Sean," she says. "Did I do something? I mean, I thought we were all getting along great."

"It's not that."

"What is it then?"

I let a minute pass while we walk down the hall. After a few paces, she says, "C'mon, I can handle it."

"It's just that," I say, then can't finish.

"What is it just?" She stares, unflinching. "What?" she asks more sharply.

"It's Nick. He latches on."

She scrutinizes my face, waiting for more explanation, and I have to look away. "I don't want to hurt him again." The resolution of my voice surprises me.

"Oh. I see." She twirls the ends of her scarf. "Ah, now I got you."

"Alicia." I reach to touch her arm but she shies away.

"No, that's all right. It's all right." We've reached the hospital exit, and she peers out the glass doors, checking the rain outside. "See you around," she says. When she walks away, all she leaves is a muddy boot print.

Months later, I'm woken up by a call.

"This is Ed. I'm Alicia Straninsky's ex," a deep voice announces.

"Ex?"

"Husband. Geez. Did I wake you? I didn't think you'd be sleeping."

"No, no." I start to explain how I've been working late hours. "Is she OK?" I manage to mumble. I can't find my glasses.

"Not quite. She's had a fall, doc. She broke her hip. You were listed on her emergency contact form."

I put on my glasses and the room comes into sudden focus. "Husband?" I ask in a more clear tone.

"Well, from years ago."

I wouldn't know it's sleeting except the minute I'm out of the car, my wet clothes freeze onto my skin. I don't even remember turning on the wipers.

In the emergency room, the nurse points me to Ed, a man considerably older than Alicia. A woman in her twenties is holding his hand. Ed has a scruffy look like most people here, but with him, it seems possible that even without an emergency, he might look exactly this way. His hair is a nest of dark brown and he's wearing a Black Sabbath T-shirt with *Paranoid* written across his chest. The shirt is tattered in unexpected places: near the bellybutton, on his upper arm, by the clavicle. He shakes my hand vigorously and thanks me.

"How's she doing?"

"We haven't been told anything, except to wait." The young woman nods her head. She can't be more than a college kid.

"I wish she'd told me. I had no idea." Ed scratches his head for a long time. "Thank god she still had me on the forms. We made each other health proxies, but that's when we were married. That's Alicia for you. Good with planning. Not so good with the follow-through."

We make small talk. Ed teaches sociology. He and Alicia were married for less than a year. He wanted children. She didn't. We chat about the weather.

"It's not my business, I suppose, but I thought you were her doctor. I wouldn't have woken you. It said Dr. Sean so I thought we'd better call you."

"Well, I'm her radiologist."

"I see," Ed says, looking puzzled. "Like you take her X-rays?"

When we're finally taken to see Alicia, she's lying with a pillow between her legs. They'll take her into surgery, reconnect her hips with screws. "Oh, hi," she says, not directed at either of us. She looks to Ed and says, "Good to see you," and waves to me. "I can't believe you both are here," she says shyly, as if we've thrown her some surprise party.

Ed fills her in on the new college where he teaches. I show them pictures of Nick in his Halloween costume. *So it takes a little boy to make you a pictures guy*, Alicia says. I stay to help Ed with the forms, but leave before they wheel Alicia back, still fractured, in pain, held up with metal. I've never known how to say a proper goodbye.

In March, Alicia is back to check for more distant metastasis. She comes in in a wheelchair. Even seated, she seems barely capable of holding up her weight. Her lips are pale and cracked. Her breathing is labored for the brief time we chat. She asks if Nick is well and I say we should go to the harbor sometime, grab hot dogs. *Sure*, she says, emptily. Later, Alicia waves a wan hand and mouths a soft *Bye*. I pretend I'm busy with paperwork and nod a quick acknowledgment. *Heartless*, we call oncologists who abandon the patients they cannot save. *Cowards*, we say of husbands who flee rather than see their wives suffer. I place the X-ray vest too hard on a fifty-five-year-old man who's come in for a pelvic exam. I shuffle through his charts with some force.

What would otherwise be a perfect day: When the second call comes from Ed, it's a beautiful, dry June day. Nick has agreed to try a baseball day camp and I'm plotting the rest of our summer—Little League, season tickets behind the dugout at Camden Yards, and a trip to Hershey Park where Nick can discover chocolate heaven. It's been weeks since he's asked about Alicia. There is no hint of humidity, no heavy rains, and I sit in my car and wait patiently for the traffic to thin out from the afternoon game. In all of Baltimore, it's a perfectly ordinary day.

I see Ed in the hospital ward, next to a young woman rubbing his shoulders. I can't be sure it's the same girlfriend from the winter. He gets up to shake my hand. He's a broken man.

"Thanks for coming. I know she would've wanted you here. She considered you a friend. She didn't really have a network here." His eyes fill with tears. The girlfriend strokes his arm and Ed holds up a hand to signal that he's OK. "Anyway, you were on the short list. Told you she was organized. There was a sort of phone chain. Well, she didn't know that many people. I have no fucking idea how these things work," he says, waving an arm over the empty corridor. There's the distinctive odor of antiseptic, evidence of eradication, of something made absent.

For days, I take the long way from the basement elevator to my office, knowing she's somewhere in the morgue's drawers smelling of all kinds of noxious chemicals.

The memorial the night before the burial is a New Age thing arranged by Ed. It's not an open casket event, but I'm still surprised to see there isn't even a coffin, no photos of Alicia as a kid or smiling with Ed in healthier days.

Ed has asked everyone to bring things that remind them of Alicia. I couldn't settle on anything, and on the way over, bought a cheese danish when I couldn't find a cinnamon bun. A woman walks up to the lectern holding an almanac. "Alicia was all brains," she says rather gravely, and people clap. A man produces a bamboo stick and says, "Alicia was all strength." Another woman waves a copy of *To Kill a Mockingbird*. "For our stubborn tomboy," she says to a room that breaks out in laughter. I hold onto my Dunkin' Donuts bag while people shoot me curious looks.

When the ceremony is over, Ed is surrounded by people extending condolences. He spots me and says, "Ah, the good doc. Great that you made it."

"Wouldn't have missed it. Nice event. I mean, you know, for what it is." We let a soundless minute pass while Ed nods to several people. "No pictures?"

"Alicia wanted it this way. She was never showy. Never thought she was much to look at."

"Is there anything I can do?" I ask.

"No, no. You've done so much already. Thank you."

Outside, I cool my temple against the window of the Camry as car after car turns on its lights and winds its way out of the parking lot. Ed catches me as I'm about to turn the keys in the ignition. He angles his head in. "Actually, Sean, could you do me this one big favor? I've been going nuts here. Her mom is flying in and then her cousins are coming, and of course I have to pick them all up. Since you live in the neighborhood, would you mind dropping this off at the funeral home in the morning? It's her clothes."

"Anything to help."

Then, as if remembering something, he blurts, "Can you believe her mother didn't come to the memorial? She thinks we're hippies, I suppose. That's Mrs. Straninsky for you. She hated me, that despicable old woman," he says with a distant look.

"Don't worry. I got it, Ed."

"Yes, tomorrow, if you can go to the Funeral King, it'd be great." He hands me a shopping bag.

The end of the college semester has snuck up on me, and I can't find a babysitter for the weekend. I drive to the Morell Park Funeral Home with Nick asleep in the back seat. It's a stately Gothic Revival manor, a castle-like structure that sits on acres of manicured gardens and reflecting pools. The funeral director is a colorful man widely known as the Funeral King, in part because he holds a monopoly on the burial business, and because he appears in TV ads promising, "We treat your loved ones like royalty."

It takes a long while before the Funeral King himself answers the bell.

"I'm sorry for your loss," he says in a deep voice.

"Thank you." I hand over the bag. "This is for Ms. Straninsky."

"Ah. Lady Straninsky. Come in, come in, please." I walk a few steps into the parlor and point to Nick in the car. We watch Nick press his mouth against the window and puff his cheeks out like a blowfish. "I'm sorry, you're..."

"Her radiologist. I was also a friend. Is she..." I begin to mutter but can't stomach the thought that she's steps away in the basement on some cold, metal table, her body drained of its fluids and her face powdered and rouged to an obscene color.

"She's almost ready," the Funeral King says, placing a hand on my arm. "She's comfortable now."

I think of how comfortable she might have been in her last days. I wonder whether Ed would've known to increase the pain medication only as needed to maximize its numbing effect. I wonder whether he would've soaked her feet in warm water, changed her sheets twice a day, massaged her sores, made her final moments somehow bearable. In her last week, she would've been incapable of communicating her most basic wishes—a shave of ice for her dry mouth, another drop of morphine, the need to be shifted in bed every few hours to relieve the pressure of one limb pressing on another. It should've been me there to listen for the mysterious rhythm of her final breaths.

"She's almost ready," the Funeral King says in a soothing baritone, his voice seeming to travel to me from somewhere far away. "I'll just make sure that everything's here." He ruffles through the bag. "Well, actually, you seem to have forgotten her...undergarments. Don't worry," he says when I stare, puzzled. "You're not the first. It's usually the thing people will forget." He opens the bag for me to examine. There's a white hat and gloves, along with a blue dress—a real '50's outfit. I wonder if Ed is out of his mind. There are even nylon stockings, but no underwear. "We usually keep some extras around, but I'm sorry, we've been so busy and this is really cutting it close. If you wouldn't mind just bringing some of her garments, we can take care of everything." He anticipates my objection. "I would suggest, there is a mall a mile or so away. Don't worry," he says again. I must've looked terrified then. "This happens all the time."

In the Victoria's Secret, Nick tries to don a giant pair of angel wings. "Oh, honey," a flustered saleswoman yells, "those wings aren't for

playing." Then she turns in my direction. The smell of her perfume hits me before she reaches me.

I apologize and she says with a broad smile, "All the kids love that. Are you looking for anything in particular?"

"Yes, I'm looking for underwear. And bras."

"Sure."

"It should be something special."

"Of course." She eyes Nick, who is now tugging the arm of a teddy bear that's part of a display. I make a face at him to stop.

"No. Something very special. For a beautiful woman."

"Well, we have many special things. We have these of course," she says, holding up a thong. "These are very popular."

"We need something classy."

"Is there a specific color you had in mind?"

"Let's see. Her dress is blue."

"Well, how about this in royal blue?" She holds up a modest set of satin underwear. "Classy but beautiful. It's what she's wearing." The saleswoman points to a large poster of a thin, voluptuous model she explains is Brazilian. "Quite stunning," she says to herself. I buy the set and have her throw in the straps the model sports that seem to do nothing but to connect her stockings to her underwear. "Practical and elegant," the saleswoman admires. "Would you like some body lotion? It's called Amazon Goddess. It smells like the rainforest." I want to ask if she's ever smelled the rainforest, but I purchase a small bottle anyway.

I think, For one day, Alicia, you will be the princess of Morrell Park, of ketard on hot dogs, of small breasts.